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RETHINKING WARTIME RADICALISM: THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT AND DREAMS
OF BRITAIN'S POST-WAR FUTURE*

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The British general election of 1945 and the return of the nation's first ever majority Labour government was a profound turning point in Britain's political history. The scale of Labour's victory, and the belief in its inevitability, has, however, obscured important developments in British Conservatism. Historians have subsequently characterized the Conservative party as either unwilling to develop their own distinct plans for the post-war future, or divided between those who were willing to embrace the policies of social democracy and those with a neo-liberal approach to political economy. This article challenges this depiction by examining the thoughts and actions of those within what it terms the wartime 'Conservative movement': the constellation of fringe and pressure groups that orbited around the Conservative party during the period. In examining this movement, it identifies three major traditions of Conservative political thinking, and three sets of activists and parliamentarians all committed to developing radical Conservative plans for post-war Britain. The article demonstrates how these different traditions built upon but also radicalized pre-existing currents of Conservative thought, how the language of social democracy was co-opted and reinterpreted by those within the Conservative movement, and how the war changed Conservative perception of the British people.

The 1945 general election remains one of the most significant moments in British political history. * In a bitterly fought contest, the Labour party achieved a landslide victory. Labour captured 239 seats in an unprecedented swing of the electoral pendulum. The government that followed was transformative. Led by Clement Attlee, it developed a mixed-market economy, introduced a comprehensive system of social welfare, and began the process of decolonization. Though many of these actions have been traced to emerging interwar ‘middle opinion’ and decisions of the wartime coalition government, there is little doubt that the nature, speed, and extent of these changes was profoundly affected by the election of a Labour, rather than Conservative, government.¹

The scale of Labour’s victory and the importance of the Attlee government has meant the campaign has received more attention than any other. Explaining Labour’s success has produced detailed work on the campaigns of all major parties, plus research into the impact of the press, army education, and rhetoric on the election—all areas considered vital to Labour’s victory.² Importantly, the argument over the *meaning* of the 1945 election—in terms of indicating whether a radical or socialist electorate really existed—has long structured the political history of post-war Britain as well as Labour’s own electoral strategy.³ Likewise, the debate on the character of Labour’s policies at and after the election—just how truly ‘social’ and ‘democratic’ nationalization, for example, really was—has been recognized by historians as integral to explaining social democracy’s ‘brief life’ and is another lens through which debate on the left is viewed.⁴

Yet, placing wartime politics into a narrative of Labour's rise and fall is partial and problematic. The fact that Labour won in 1945 so convincingly has lent Conservative failure a sense of inevitability. As John Charmley has written 'it is to be doubted whether even had the Archangel Gabriel appeared to take charge of the campaign, the Tories could have won.'⁵ As a result, the development of Conservatism during the war—as opposed to organizational developments or questions of party management—has often been glossed over.⁶ Moreover, in the few works which do pay attention to Conservative ideas, the focus has been overwhelmingly on the question of welfare. Divides over William Beveridge's report into the future of the social services—titled *Social Insurance and Allied Services* but popularly known as the Beveridge Report—in November 1942 have been treated as coterminous with divides in the Conservative party in other policy areas and at other moments during the war. Historians, as a result, have almost universally depicted the Conservative party as divided in two; between those more willing to embrace comprehensive social service provision and government economic intervention as opposed to those committed to a minimal safety-net and free enterprise.⁷ Even the Conservative party's two most prominent recent students, E. H. H. Green and John Ramsden, followed the trend. Green characterized wartime Conservatives as divided between 'progressives' and those with a 'liberal market' critique, while Ramsden preferred the terms 'progressives' and 'reactionaries.' Those who fell into neither camp were allotted by Ramsden a seemingly unproblematic 'middle' position.⁸ Whatever the nomenclature, the implication has been the same. Conservative wartime political thinking was undertaken within strict parameters and on terrain dominated by the left. This article seeks to challenge this position, revealing the

intellectual vitality of wartime Conservatism and the way Conservatives refashioned social democracy to suit their own ends. It does so by examining the actions and ideas of those within the Conservative movement.

The term Conservative movement is usually associated with the United States and the various think-tanks (such as the Heritage Foundation), academic-networks, and periodicals (like *The National Review*), which from 1945 onwards sought to ideologically remake the Republican party.⁹ A similar constellation of organizations, however, has also long existed in Britain. The British Conservative movement was made up of MPs, peers, and activists as well as Conservative-leaning financiers, industrialists, writers, and academics. Organized around various ginger-groups, trade associations, dining clubs, journals, and informal political groupings, those within this movement competed with each other in their attempts to change the trajectory of the Conservative party. Indeed, it was frequently outside the party's official channels and policy making bodies where Conservative ideas were created, debated, and refined.

The Conservative movement flourished in the Edwardian period, at a time when many believed Conservatism was in crisis and when groups like the Tariff Reform League helped the Conservative party construct a more participatory type of activism suited for the new democratic age.¹⁰ It arguably reached its peak of influence in the immediate years after the First World War (WWI), when the rise of Labour forced the party to rethink its strategic position and various Conservative anti-waste and anti-alien campaigners helped topple the Lloyd George coalition.¹¹ Less powerful in the years afterwards, the Conservative movement nonetheless remained a permanent fixture of British political and intellectual life between the

wars, where, as Gary Love has demonstrated, its members used the vibrant right-wing periodical press to push their particular versions of Conservatism.¹² Indeed, during the 1930s as a result of Stanley Baldwin's attempt to tackle the intellectual influence of the left—what Clarisse Berthèzene has termed his 'counter-hegemonic project'—groups within the Conservative movement had more spaces than ever to promote their views, including via the party's proto-think-tank Ashridge College which had been founded in 1928.¹³

As such, when the Conservative party's own institutional apparatus, including its publications and research departments, were shuttered in 1939 as part of the Conservative interpretation of the wartime party-truce, and when local Conservative associations focused on war-work, Conservative political activity was once more redirected into the Conservative movement.¹⁴ At a time when Conservatives were faced with a leader in Churchill seemingly unwilling to discuss post-war reconstruction, the relative absence of traditional Conservative party figures within the government, and the sense that the Conservative cause was not being fought for, it was in the Conservative movement where most discussion occurred and where the party's public image was constructed. In short, to understand the ways in which Conservatives sought to refashion Conservatism during the war, it is to the movement, not the party, that historians must turn.

This article is divided into four parts. The first three of these examine the three main political traditions within the wartime Conservative movement: Tory Progressives, Individualists, and Constructive Imperialists.¹⁵ The term tradition is used to indicate a distinct way individuals understood the world around them, and the intellectual and political inheritance from which these ideas stemmed.¹⁶ Having

outlined each tradition's visions of Britain's post-war future—from creating a new ascetic Christian elite to deepening the bonds of empire—the fourth section explores the extent to which the war had transformed their political thought as well as making it more visible. Highlighting the power vacuum created by Churchill's leadership, deepened fears of totalitarianism, and transformed ideas about the nature of the British people, this fourth section demonstrates how both political and ideological factors led members of these traditions to believe that enacting their proposals was both more necessary and more possible than ever.

I

The most prominent tradition within the Conservative movement were those who thought of themselves as Tory Progressives; a term which captures the way in which they used a rhetoric of progress and modernity to further traditional views about the organic nature of society and the need for a paternal order.¹⁷ This tradition was made up of two groups of Conservatives. First, those who had established careers within the party, often within Conservative Central Office itself, like the MPs R. A. Butler, Hugh Molson, and David Maxwell Fyfe. Second, a younger generation of Conservative MPs, who organized themselves around the Tory Reform Committee (TRC), among them the Viscount Hinchinbrooke and Quintin Hogg.

The latter of these two groups has received the most attention due to the TRC's public attempts to force the Conservative leadership to adopt the Beveridge Report, and the fact that historians have often conflated the wartime Committee with the post-war Tory Reform *Group*.¹⁸ In reality, though the TRC gained more

attention, it was the older generation of Conservatives who played the greater role during the war—not least by providing intellectual and institutional support to their young charges.

R. A. Butler was the undoubted centre of this older group of progressive Conservatives. A Foreign Office minister between 1938 and 1941, Butler recognized the conflict as an opportunity to transform Conservatism. As soon as war was declared, he persuaded Neville Chamberlain to create a Central Committee for National Policy (CCNP) to draw up what he termed a ‘program for a New England’,¹⁹ To aid him, Butler recruited, among others, the poet T. S. Eliot, the moral philosopher Oliver Franks, and the sociologist Karl Mannheim.²⁰ The CCNP was consciously not, however, an abstract endeavor but sought to turn theory into practice. As Geoffrey Crowther, editor of *The Economist* and CCNP attendee, stated: ‘Words such as freedom, justice, have no practical significance for many of the working population unless they are translated into concrete facts.’²¹ Turning theory into policy was the CCNP’s main goal.

The most ambitious proposal developed within the committee was for the codification of a new social contract between citizen and the state.²² Drawing on an idea developed by ‘radical centrist’ groups in the 1930s such as the Next Five Years Group and the organization Political and Economic Planning—many of whose members were also part of the CCNP—this new contract included new social rights and a guaranteed ‘national minimum’ of income and nutrition levels.²³ Yet, just as in debates over suffrage eighty years previously, so Tory Progressives argued new rights also implied new duties.²⁴ Among the most important of these was peacetime military conscription, a policy which received strong support throughout the war

from the party's voluntary wing.²⁵ More than just a practical measure, conscription reflected the belief that the willingness of (male) citizens to sacrifice themselves for the state was both the traditional and ultimate bond of mutual responsibility between people and nation. Moreover, the relative ease of introducing conscription during WWII, in contrast to WWI, made many within the CCNP believe citizens were willing to undertake onerous responsibilities in other areas, such as giving one year of 'service' to the state, taking any work offered, and relocating to areas of skills shortages.²⁶

Married to this new social and political compact were plans to widen opportunity by broadening the intake of Britain's private schools, professions, and the Conservative party itself – another area in which there was substantial support from within the party.²⁷ Such views and the rhetoric of what Butler in 1941 termed a new 'equalitarian England' could appear quite close to those on the left.²⁸

Nonetheless, it is wrong to equate the Tory Progressive's views with the kind of wartime egalitarianism that was exemplified in the work of George Orwell and J. B. Priestley.²⁹ The rhetoric of 'equality of sacrifice' and 'fair shares' was employed by Tory Progressives but it was frequently used to condemn, not hail, the working-class. In an analysis frequently heard within the party's 1922 Committee of back benchers,³⁰ William Weir, CCNP participant and Scottish industrialist, argued that factory workers abused the conditions of full employment to demand excessive wages while those in uniform suffered low pay.³¹ Tory Progressives might have agreed with Orwell's description in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) of England as 'a family with the wrong members in control' but they did not feel that these wrong members were drawn from just the upper class.³² Likewise, Tory Progressives also

differed with those on the left over the *purpose* of reducing inequality which, for them, was to ensure that everyone had an equal opportunity to serve and sacrifice themselves for the nation. This was deemed necessary to develop a new generation of leaders. This would include the young classless RAF officer—the *sine qua non* of wartime reconstruction texts—but also older figures, like the responsible country squire, more common to the tory imagination.³³ These leaders would also preside over what Tory Progressives hoped would be a more Christian nation after the war.

At one end of the spectrum this desire for a more Christian Britain amounted to support for state religious education—a topic again popular among Conservative associations.³⁴ At the other, in a proposal made by Butler in May 1941, it took the form of a new Christian polity where spiritual and temporal authority were reunited and party government was replaced with unified Christian government.³⁵ This proposal, which drew on ideas developed by The Moot association of interwar Christian intellectuals—a number of whom, like Franks and Mannheim, served on the CCNP—was part of the wider belief that only spiritual unity between leaders and led could maintain liberty in an era when state planning and economic intervention had become essential.³⁶ As such, like those on the left who sought to build socialism as well as socialism, so Tory Progressives believed only by making Christians could their vision be realized.

The agenda crafted by Butler and the CCNP was bold yet it nonetheless resonated with a sizeable section of the Conservative party. Likewise, though not articulated in the same holistic fashion, similar themes were present in a wide range of Conservative reconstruction literature—including those by the Marquess of Salisbury and Viscount Astor—that covered everything from youth services to the

future of the empire.³⁷ Such popularity partly sprang from the fact that many of the ideas and proposals put forward by wartime Tory Progressives stemmed from older modes of Conservative political thinking. In particular, they fitted closely with the interwar 'new Conservatism' epitomized by Stanley Baldwin. In the many books and pamphlets produced by those who associated themselves with Baldwinite conservatism, and especially Ashridge College, many of the same ideas regarding a new emphasis on duties,³⁸ the need for a new aristocracy,³⁹ and importance of the state in encouraging unselfish devotion can be found.⁴⁰ Similarly, Baldwin had long been keen to present Christianity in non-denominational terms and had aimed to re-christianize Conservatism.⁴¹ The ideas and plans of wartime Tory Progressives were, in many ways, interwar Baldwinism shorn of its emollient language and self-conscious anti-utopianism, and taken to its logical extreme.

II

When Viscount Hinchinbrooke complained in 1943 of the 'damage done to this country since the last war by individualist business-men, financiers and speculator...creeping unnoticed into the fold of Conservatism', he was referring to men like Sir Ernest Benn.⁴² Successful publisher and unashamed capitalist, Benn was the centre of the Conservative Individualist tradition. Small and bespectacled, he began as a Liberal, before arguing in 1929 that the Liberal party needed to commit 'harri-kari' to suffuse Conservatism with free trade doctrine.⁴³ He spent the next decade leading a number of organizations which he hoped would form the basis of a

popular front of the right, linking what he thought were the soundest elements in the Liberal and Conservative parties.⁴⁴

By 1941, Benn had become disturbed by the extent of wartime regulation and began a publishing 'blitz'.⁴⁵ This was followed by the publication of his *Manifesto for British liberty* in August 1942. The *Manifesto*, which appeared at a time when many Conservatives were concerned by Labour's attempts to repeal the Trades Dispute Act (1927), sought to justify Benn's claim that wartime regulation was a cloak for post-war socialism.⁴⁶ To support his position, Benn created the Society of Individualists, a group which had over 30,000 members by the end of the war.⁴⁷ By 1943, the Society had been joined by four further organizations set up by Conservative parliamentarians whose goals centred around the need to secure the minimum of state control and the maximum of individual liberty after the war: Progress Trust, Active Back Benchers Group, Fighting Fund for Freedom (FFF), and National League for Freedom (NLFF). Together, these five groups, whose membership frequently overlapped, formed the backbone of the wartime Individualist tradition.

During the war members of these groups were portrayed as hopelessly out of touch. The Society of Individualists was, for example, depicted by cartoonist David Low in *The Evening Standard* as a group of top-hatted capitalists, ermine clad peers, and Colonel Blimps.⁴⁸ Since the 1990s, however, they have increasingly been presented as early neo-liberals.⁴⁹ At first sight this is understandable. There were occasional links between wartime Individualists and those who made up the so-called 'neo-liberal thought collective'. Waldron Smithers, the leader of the FFF, for example, wrote *Socialism offers slavery* in 1945 as a popular version of F. A. Hayek's

The road to serfdom (1944), one of neo-liberalism's key texts.⁵⁰ Yet, just as Smithers fundamentally misrepresented Hayek—presenting *The road to serfdom* as a religious and empirical critique of state socialism—so later historians have been too quick to draw parallels. Early neo-liberals like Hayek and Karl Popper believed state intervention was necessary to both ensure a functioning free market and to remedy some of the inequalities such a market would generate.⁵¹ Wartime Individualists, by contrast, were opposed to *any* expansion in the state. There was nothing ‘neo’ about the Individualists’ liberalism or their support for *laissez-faire*.

Given their celebration of Victorian political economy, Individualist’s key proposal for post-war reconstruction was a return to free trade. Diagnosing the rise of Nazism as a product of economic nationalism, men like the Oxford philosopher and keen member of the Society of Individualists L. P. Jacks presented free trade as the essential building block of any post-war international organization.⁵² Jacks, with arguments explicitly indebted to Richard Cobden, suggested only free trade could induce the necessary commercial recovery, economic interdependence, and habit of cooperation that would make any successor to the League of Nations successful.⁵³ Similarly, free trade was hailed by Individualists as the centerpiece of domestic revival. As Benn wrote in his 1942 book *Hard Times Ahead?*, ‘people who can feed themselves can afford the folly of Protection; that, however, is not our position.’⁵⁴ In the situation of potential starvation that Benn (and indeed almost all Individualists) envisaged after the war, free trade was presented as vital for national survival and to return Britain to its role as workshop of the world.⁵⁵

Accompanying liberalization of international trade, Individualists also argued for a similar freeing of domestic economic activity. This reflected the disquiet that

had grown among grassroots Conservative activists since 1941 about the post-war future of private enterprise in general and the small trader in particular.⁵⁶ Activists within the NLF, FFF, and the Society of Individualists argued that the totality of government measures introduced during the war—direction of labour, rationing, food subsidies, purchase controls, capital controls etc.—needed to be removed. By doing this, and by cutting the size of the state back to Edwardian levels, Individualists claimed the economy would be improved and the nation's liberties restored.

Such proposals often led Individualists to be accused of being indifferent to the plight of the poor and unemployed. As a critical writer in *The Irish Times* put it, for all their talk of the pre-war comforts of the home life this meant little to those who previously been forced to eat only 'bread and teas'.⁵⁷ On the one hand, Individualists responded to these accusations by highlighting the superior value of constitutional liberties. As one writer for the NLFF put it, 'a free mind with restricted spending ability is surely preferable to wealth combined with an enslaved mind'.⁵⁸ On the other, Individualists, like Tory Progressives, were prepared to tackle criticisms on their opponent's territory. As Benn recorded at a meeting of the Provident Institution, life insurance and private pensions were themselves a 'high grade social service'.⁵⁹ They were cheaper when provided by private enterprise and more truly social; the profits they generated enriched the *entire* community not just service users. Likewise, as Smithers argued, true equality of opportunity only occurred when individual's life chances were determined by their own choice and initiative rather than by bureaucrats.⁶⁰ Even free trade was given a wartime makeover, and presented as it had been in debates over the corn laws as an inherently democratic creed. Another of the groups lined to Benn, the Free Trade Legion, stated in 1942

that under free trade 'organised sectional interests' would finally give way to the 'interests of the multitudes of individuals who form the community'.⁶¹

III

The resuscitation of an older form of politics was also evident in the final significant tradition within the wartime Conservative movement: Constructive Imperialists.⁶² This was a tradition whose origins stretched back to Edwardian debates over tariff reform, and was made up of those who had come to see the British empire not just as an adjunct to British power but as the prime concern of British policy. At the heart of this tradition were a group of veteran imperialists, including Leo Amery, George Lloyd, and Henry Page Croft. They had cut their teeth advocating greater imperial economic unity, and, especially under Baldwin, had often placed the cause of tariff reform above party loyalty. As a result, they had been largely excluded from the party's higher councils. They saw the war as the last great opportunity to unite the empire and provide a secure footing for its defense.

Despite their blimpish image—Henry Page Croft advocated arming defense volunteers with pikes—this emphasis on imperial security frequently led Constructive Imperialists to embrace policies, like family allowances, associated with the progressive left.⁶³ Responding to the fear among Conservatives during the war about the declining birth rate, Amery, a former colonial secretary, used arguments indebted to the Edwardian national efficiency movement to suggest that family allowances could solve the problem—in contrast to the proposal to restrict women's education as others within the party, like the Catholic convert and future

Conservative MP, Christopher Hollis, advocated.⁶⁴ Similarly, family allowances, by boosting nutritional intake, were also advanced by Amery as a means to improve national health—necessary given his belief in the continued relevance of mass armies. Indeed, Amery, longtime leader of the Empire Industries Association and Secretary of State for India and Burma during the war, suggested that the Beveridge Report was at one with the traditions of the party. It was Conservative because of its emphasis on the family, and, more importantly, because family allowances, higher pensions, and a system of national health had also been the policy of Joseph Chamberlain.⁶⁵

This link to Chamberlain also explains why many saw the cost of post-war reconstruction in general, and the Beveridge Report in particular, as an *opportunity* for imperial unity—the importance of which, given Britain’s likely diminished post-war standing, was not lost on Conservatives.⁶⁶ As Amery argued, not only would the Beveridge Report increase the size of the home market by raising consumption, it would also force the development of closer imperial economic ties by making exports more expensive. In short, the Beveridge Report would only be financially sustainable if Britain was part of a fully integrated imperial economy.

It is also this imperial emphasis which explains much of the criticism directed at the Beveridge Report from within the ranks of the Conservative imperialists. Those wedded to the cause of imperial unity were, for example, deeply concerned about the Report’s effect on prospects for empire settlement—the significance of which had been underlined during the war due to Britain’s financial and military dependence on the Dominions and colonies.⁶⁷ As such, when Constructive Imperialists like Basil Peto MP called for a delay in implementing the Report’s

proposals it was often because they believed the scheme needed to be part of an imperial plan, not because they objected in principle. As Amery proclaimed in a speech delivered in Birmingham in March 1943, 'only a planned and controlled trade and industrial policy can sustain a planned social system in a highly competitive world.'⁶⁸ The implication was clear: if Britain was to have a more developed system of social welfare, the state needed to undertake economic planning.

Economic planning also had a rich history amongst Constructive Imperialists.⁶⁹ The Empire Economic Union (EEU) and the Empire Industries Association (EIA) advocated planning in the 1930s as part of their proposals for scientific tariffs, which, when combined with proto-Keynesian demand management, were presented as an alternative to socialist physical planning.⁷⁰ During the war this commitment to planning and Keynesian budgetary policy was extended to numerous areas of reconstruction by those associated with the EEU and EIA, including transport policy and the location of industry,⁷¹ and, in keeping with their imperial ambitions, was expanded to encompass the empire.⁷² David Gammans, EIA member and Conservative MP, produced the most ambitious of these proposals. A former civil servant in Malaya, Gammans believed Britain's failures in the Far East had occurred because colonies and Dominions had been treated as isolated units.⁷³ In response, Gammans sought to bind colonial and domestic reconstruction together to reinforce interdependence between Britain and her empire. To attain this interdependence, Gammans advocated establishing a common minimum standard of social service across the empire, harmonized benefit levels (to promote empire settlement), and a shared cultural and educational policy. All of this was to be administered by a common imperial civil service.

Despite this emphasis on a new pan-imperial civil service, Gammans and other wartime Constructive Imperialists nonetheless remained wedded to parliamentary government in a way that some like Butler were not.⁷⁴ As Amery wrote in his 1944 pamphlet *The future of parliament*, to be successful post-war Conservatism needed to be radical but, 'at the same time it must never lose its contact with the root of our greatness or lose sight of the value of our national institution'.⁷⁵ This did not mean leaving Parliament exactly as it had been. In order to maintain the legitimacy of parliamentary government, Constructive Imperialists argued that Parliament needed to better represent the nation. On the one hand, this would entail going back to a model of functional representation and multi-member boroughs (integral to the pre-1832 constitution) in order to represent specific economic interests and the diversity of the modern city. On the other hand, it meant embracing untested ideas like proportional representation, life peerages for those with specialist economic knowledge, and a new imperial parliamentary radio channel to ensure that all citizens across the empire engaged with the politics of the mother democracy.

V

These, then, were the three main traditions within the wartime Conservative movement. Though only some were willing to embrace policies associated with social democracy, all were happy to adapt the language of progressive politics—equality, democracy and active citizenship—in order to further longstanding Conservative aims. Yet, the wartime Conservative movement and the ideas its members embraced were not just a continuation of pre-existing tory politics. Older

ideas and arguments, like those over free trade versus tariff reform, had been resuscitated, but a new urgency was added to them out of Conservative's belief that, unless their plans and policies were put into effect, totalitarianism would emerge in Britain.

The term 'totalitarian' was first used to describe Mussolini's 1923 electoral reforms.⁷⁶ By the 1930s the concept had broadened into a description of any attempt to monopolize power—be it political, intellectual, moral or religious. During the 1930s, and especially after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, there had been a fear among some Conservatives, notably Baldwin, that a form of totalitarianism might appear in Britain—one driven by a fickle electorate and new methods of mass communication.⁷⁷ During the war this fear grew in breadth and intensity. The conflict had led to the creation of new tools and techniques to manage and regulate the economy, and had seen unprecedented attempts to monitor and manipulate public opinion. While most agreed that during the conflict that this was necessary to win the war, the fear lurked that come peacetime the enhanced power of the state might be used for nefarious purposes.

Crucially, however, while many within the wartime Conservative movement feared the possibility of totalitarianism in post-war Britain, they were divided over *where* they believed the totalitarian threat would spring from. For Individualists like Ernest Benn—who in 1942 had argued that too many thought of totalitarianism 'only as a matter of Gestapos, rubber truncheons and the persecution of Jews' and 'forget that it started with a long catalogue of social reforms'—it was the character of the *electorate* that was the problem.⁷⁸ The growth of government activity since 1914 had, in Benn's mind, reduced the individuals capacity for moral development so

much that the electorate were now incapable of resisting the bait of further social reform presented by demagogues. Tory Progressives like Butler meanwhile placed the greatest emphasis on the character of the political *elite*. Men who lacked strict Christian piety would be unable withstand the temptation of monopolizing and abusing state power. Constructive Imperialists, by contrast, focused on the place of *parties* within the British political system. Amery, for example, updated the analysis of liberal constitutional theorists—including A. V. Dicey and W. E. H. Lecky—about the development of the party caucus in the 1880s to explain how the Nazi party, controlled from outside the Reichstag, had overridden constitutional safeguards—something which he feared the Labour party, with its trade union link, was also capable of.⁷⁹

Nor were such views entirely fanciful given the prominent position within the Labour party of those like Stafford Cripps and Harold Laski, who had previously questioned the values of democracy—the former, for example, had suggested in 1933 that any incoming socialist government would need to treat opposition as sabotage.⁸⁰ Churchill's infamous 'gestapo speech' in the 1945 general election campaign might have backfired, but he would not have made it had he thought that no one would have agreed with his views.⁸¹ Nonetheless, for all the importance of the war in deepening *fears* among wartime Conservatives, so paradoxically it also created *hope* amongst them that their plans and policies would be put into effect. Much of this was due to the changed dynamics within the Conservative party.

The relative lack of success those within the Conservative movement had encountered during the 1930s in changing the party's outlook, leadership, and policy, had largely been caused by the party's electoral success and the type of

consensual, seemingly non-ideological, Conservatism that Baldwin did so much to promote and Chamberlain later embraced.⁸² Large majorities in 1931 and 1935 (and the prospect of similar success in the anticipated 1940 general election) meant the Conservative-dominated National governments had little need to pay attention to their own Conservative critics.⁸³ The argument common to so many within the Conservative movement that only their form of 'true' Conservatism held the key to electoral survival had been proved false.⁸⁴

The Second World War and the fall of Chamberlain—in the end partly the work of a group of Conservative MPs led by Lord Salisbury operating within the Conservative movement—fundamentally changed the political circumstances in which Conservatives operated.⁸⁵ For much of the war, Conservatives were concerned not only that they would likely lose an election, but that the entire culture of Conservatism, from private schools to capitalist industry, was under threat.⁸⁶ It was only once military victory was assured that Conservative electoral success seemed (wrongly) assured. Likewise, the war had seen the grip Baldwin, and then Chamberlain, exerted over their Party removed, allowing critics of their positions—or those like Butler who simply wanted to push Baldwinite Conservatism further and faster than the leadership thought wise—more space to operate. Nor was an alternative political or ideological position staked out by the party's new leader. Unwilling for most of the war to discuss postwar reconstruction from a party point of view, unable to devote energy to question party management, and distrustful of Conservative Central Office, Churchill's actions only increased the size of the political vacuum which those in the Conservative movement were happy to fill.⁸⁷ Indeed, with his tendency to promote precisely the kind of Conservatives who had been

critical of Baldwin and Chamberlain, Churchill's leadership offered those within the Conservative movement both the opportunity to re-enter government and shape the future of conservatism from within Whitehall (as was the case with Amery), or to capture the party's own policy making process (the route Butler took). Moreover, if changes at the elite level of British politics offered hope to those in the Conservative movement that their views could finally become manifesto material, so perceived changes to popular political attitudes convinced Conservatives that the electorate would embrace them.

As with their fear of totalitarianism, however, Conservatives from different traditions expressed their optimism about the character of the British electorate in distinctive ways. During the interwar period Individualists had frequently railed against the 'softness' of the electorate and the tendency to look to the state for solutions.⁸⁸ By contrast, by the end of WWII, groups like the National League for Freedom celebrated how the war had finally taught the British people the value of their historic liberties. Even better, wartime social changes convinced many Individualists that this value shift would be permanent. At the Society of Individualists first public meeting in 1943, for example, Benn declared demands for confiscatory taxation were now less attractive since 'the stately homes of England have become material for archaeologists' and 'everything we had has been placed upon the altar of patriotism'.⁸⁹ Likewise, the soap magnate Viscount Leverhulme argued at the same event that the broadening of the 'income tax paying class' meant calls for higher social spending would fall on increasingly deaf ears.⁹⁰

Constructive Imperialists also had reasons to be optimistic. The centrifugal forces that had been pulling the empire apart appeared to have been put in reverse.

Indeed, the idea that Britain had faced Nazism single-handedly in 1940—one element of what Angus Calder termed ‘the myth of the blitz’—was not one that Constructive Imperialists would have recognized.⁹¹ Rather, as Amery declared in a speech to the Oxford University Conservative Association: ‘When, at the collapse of France, we stood alone, the word ‘we’ meant not England only but a brotherhood in arms bound together by common ideal and loyalties.’⁹² Moreover, this reality was one which Amery and other Constructive Imperialists believed the British people had finally learnt to appreciate. Whether it was British and Indian soldiers in Italy conversing in a blend of English, Italian and Hindi, or the donations flowing into charities such as the Indian Comforts Fund, Constructive Imperialists believed that Britons had rediscovered their imperial consciousness as a result of the war.⁹³

Similarly, Tory Progressives had cause for hope about the nation’s spiritual condition. The ‘crusading spirit’ that Henry Brooke had called for in 1940, where the nation showed its real commitment to Christianity, was a spirit which by the end of the war seemed close to being realized.⁹⁴ Not only did providential language and protestant imagery suffuse wartime art and literature, as Matthew Grimley has argued, but the relationship between church and state was being strengthened through such institutions as national days of prayer.⁹⁵ Indeed, with the introduction of compulsory religious education in Britain’s schools as a result of The Education Act (1944)—a piece of legislation not coincidentally presided over by Butler—it was hoped that *all* future generations would be more inclined to support the kind of policies advocated by Tory Progressives.

The experience of the Second World War had thus changed Conservative political thinking in important ways. Plans, policies, and justifications for them drew

on long-held Conservative ideas, but the fear of totalitarianism lest they be implemented was greater than ever and so too the optimism that they *could* be implemented. The impact of this change was felt in the development of the party's official policy during the war.

VI

Official Conservative pronouncements about the post-war future were limited during the war. It was only in 1941, after considerable pressure from the party's grassroots to respond to reconstruction plans emerging from the left, that Churchill agreed with some reluctance to the formation of a Post-War Planning Central Committee (PWPPC).⁹⁶ The PWPPC was chaired for the most part by Butler. During its years of operation the PWPPC did produce a number of genuinely novel and radical plans, particularly in the field of education and youth services. Yet, such novelty was only present when Butler was able to ensure the membership of the PWPPC's policy sub-committees reflected his own personal views. The education sub-committee, who produced the most radical reports, was, for example, chaired by the publisher Geoffrey Faber who had earlier worked with Butler in the Central Committee for National Policy.⁹⁷ Where there was more of an ideological balance within the PWPPC's sub-committees reports were either postponed indefinitely, avoided major innovations in policy, or hedged with such major qualifications as to reduce their political significance. For example, the sub-committee on industry, which took nearly three years to produce its report, accepted the principle of placing security of employment ahead of increasing overall national wealth but refused to explain how

this would impact tariff policy and failed to commit to, or use the language of, full employment.⁹⁸ From October 1944 onwards, after Butler decided that he needed to better represent party opinion, such problems worsened with few additional reports produced in the run up to the election.⁹⁹ As such, by 1945, no distinct Conservative message been crafted. The party's election campaign was instead fought largely around Churchill's leadership, with the primary theme of the 1945 Conservative manifesto—which did not even include the term 'Conservative'—being that the Conservative program was a tested and practical one.¹⁰⁰ Yet, as demonstrated, this personalised approach to the campaign was taken not because the party lacked its own set of bold or radical ideas, but quite the opposite: it was the surfeit of these ideas that was the issue.

Here, the role of 'totalitarianism' is key. Not only were Conservative's analyses of how post-war Britain should be rebuilt different to one another but they were also incompatible. For example, while some Tory Progressives called for the creation of a new non-party Christian elite to govern Britain in order to prevent totalitarianism, this anti-parliamentary attitude was at odds with Constructive Imperialist's belief that Britain's parliamentary system needed to be strengthened to avoid a Weimar style collapse. Likewise, both Constructive Imperialist's and Tory Progressive's desire for greater economic and social planning conflicted with Individualist's belief that regulation of the individual limited his or her capacity for moral development and thus increased the chance of totalitarianism. In short, what was a solution to the problem of totalitarianism for members of one tradition was often its cause for another.

It was this incompatibility of views within the Conservative party as much as between the Conservative party and Labour which explains Churchill's wariness about discussing post-war reconstruction. With a limited mandate both as Prime Minister and Conservative leader, Churchill sat precariously atop not one but two delicate ideological coalitions neither of which he could afford to disrupt. The party's 1945 election manifesto, with all its invocations of practicality, was not just 'ideological' because, as E. H. H. Green has argued, a preference for pragmatism is itself an ideological claim, but because it was a compromise necessary for a party fundamentally divided between different radical approaches to the post-war world.¹⁰¹

Whether the Conservatives could have won in 1945, or at least done better, had they put forward their own radical plans is unknowable—though some have suggested they might have done.¹⁰² What is the case, however, is that the existence of these plans and the combination of optimism and fear that motivated them had effects on the way in which wartime politics occurred. Politics is inherently multi-dimensional and the internal disputes of one party offers options and possibilities for another. This was particularly the case during WWII, where the leaders of the Liberal and Labour parties, both committed to staying within the wartime coalition, faced activists frustrated with the strictures of wartime politics. Here the existence of radical groups within the Conservative movement helped persuade Liberal and Labour dissenters to fall in line. The Liberal leader, Archibald Sinclair, facing calls in late 1942 from the Liberal Radical Action group to exit the coalition, argued that the existence of so many groups to the right of the Conservative party made it likely that the party system would break up after the war.¹⁰³ As a result, so Sinclair argued, it

was more vital than ever for Liberals to remain united in order to reap electoral dividends after the war. Clement Attlee similarly used the existence of these groups to aid maneuvers with his own party. Faced with demands in 1944 to end the by-election truce, while preventing ministers from campaigning, Attlee argued that with ministers gagged it would only aid those critical of the government, like leader of the Active Back Benchers Sir Herbert Williams, and ensure more right-wingers entered Parliament.¹⁰⁴ It was, therefore, paradoxically the existence of those who were highly critical of the wartime coalition that did much to keep it together.

V

Where does this examination of the dynamics of the wartime Conservative movement leave our wider interpretation of the politics of the Second World War? In the perennial debate about the existence of a popular wartime political ‘consensus’, the evidence suggests that there was a desire among many Conservatives to deliver equality of opportunity, provide greater public services, and undertake economic planning. Yet, these terms frequently encoded Conservative meanings. The language of social democracy pervaded wartime British political life, but it was often used to forward ideas that would have horrified social democrats. The use of concepts like equality of sacrifice to divide society rather than unite it—which, as Camilla Schofield has argued, was key to Enoch Powell’s appeal to working-class white voters in the 1960s—was a tactic which had occurred from the moment of its inception.¹⁰⁵ Social democracy’s rhetorical foundations were more than shaky, they could actively help pull down the edifice.

Moreover, while it has long been clear that there was considerable discord between the Labour and the Conservative parties over their approach to post-war reconstruction, it is evident that there were important divides within these parties as well.¹⁰⁶ Just as Stephen Brooke has shown how, during the war, the Labour party remained divided on important questions of policy—notably around nationalization—the Conservative movement had its own disagreements about ends as well as means.¹⁰⁷ Not only was there no consensus over the need for increased social welfare and the role of the state in the economy—the familiar liberal/paternalist divide—but also key differences over imperial policy, the place of the established church in national life, and even, for some, the desirability of parliamentary government itself. For once it was Labour rather than the Conservatives who were better able to paper over ideological division.

The breadth of this disagreement also highlights the extent to which political argument during the Second World War was not just couched in terms of those who did and did not support social democratic policies. Those on the right were perfectly capable of adopting some elements associated with social democracy—a more managed form of capitalism, for example—while also rejecting others. Likewise, as the Constructive Imperialists demonstrated, the support for policies contained in the Beveridge Report often occurred both because these policies could be interpreted in a Conservative light but also because they suited longer term ends like further imperial economic integration.

Nor was it the case that neo-liberalism was the alternative to social democracy. Not only was wartime opposition to central planning more often couched in classical liberal rather than neo-liberal terms, but such a response was

one of a variety that were available to Conservatives—many of which, as discussed above, were incompatible with each other. The suggestion by E. H. H. Green that we can find within the wartime Conservative party the origins of Thatcherism is anachronistic.¹⁰⁸ To paraphrase Andrew Gamble's analysis of Thatcherism, wartime Conservatives either supported the strong state *or* the free market—none supported both.¹⁰⁹ Instead of anticipating the ideological developments of the 1980s, wartime Conservatives were in fact more likely to draw on arguments from the 1890s. Whether this was Butler arguing for united temporal and spiritual authority, L. P. Jacks repeating arguments made by the Anti Corn Law League, or Leo Amery interpreting the threat of totalitarianism through the lens of late-Victorian fears of caucus politics, the Second World War drove Conservatives to look back as well as forward.

This insight also allows for a more rounded answer to the question of whether the Second World War 'radicalized' British politics. Here, the evidence of the wartime Conservative movement suggests that it did little to *create* new or drastically different approaches to politics and the economy. Even such bold ideas as the need for a new spiritual aristocracy had been foreshadowed in the 1930s years, when, as others have recently shown, Conservative intellectual culture remained rich and dynamic despite the seeming hegemony of Baldwinian Conservatism.¹¹⁰ Rather, the effect of the war and the fall of Chamberlain had been to persuade many Conservatives that the introduction of long-held but previously marginalized ideas was both more necessary and more possible. These ideas were necessary because of the fear of totalitarianism less they be adopted, and possible because of changes to the Conservative party and the supposed values of the British people.

Finally, the sheer vitality of the wartime Conservative movement demonstrates how the left were not the sole dynamic political force in the period. The image painted by Paul Addison in *The Road to 1945*, that ‘the student immersed in wartime polemics sees, in his overheated imagination, Colonel Blimp being pursued through a land of Penguin Specials by an abrasive meritocratic, a progressive churchman, and J. B. Priestley’, needs to be redrawn.¹¹¹ Not only was Colonel Blimp not a purely reactionary character, but this land of Penguin Specials was also one filled with books and articles that made the Conservative case for the future. Indeed, within this world, it was often the abrasive meritocratic, progressive churchmen, and J. B. Priestley who were the pursued rather than the pursuers.

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